What Is Prayer?

Excerpt from Prayer: A Gift From God *by Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, Supreme Chaplain of the Knights of Columbus*

Prayer is defined as "raising one's mind and heart to God, or the petition of good things from him in accord with his will" (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 534). In prayer, we turn our whole attention to God, offer him praise and, seeking only his will, ask for what we need. We are obliged to pray, but prayer is also God's gift to us. It is how we grow in our friendship with Christ, who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, leads us to the Father of mercies.

In a sense, prayer is something natural. Each human being is created in God's image and, in spite of original sin, every person retains a desire for God. Yet, it is God who seeks our friendship and draws us to himself.

Prayer in the Bible

The Old Testament presents Abraham — "our father in faith" — as a model of prayer because he walked in God's presence, listened to him and obeyed his will. Like Abraham, Moses frequently interceded before God on behalf of the chosen people. Moses' strength as a leader, however, came from his uniquely intimate relationship with God. God called Moses from the burning bush and spoke to him in a remarkably direct manner, especially during the encounter on Mt. Sinai (cf. Ex 3:1-15, 19:1-25). Because of his constant, intimate communication with God, Moses is seen as a model of contemplative prayer (*Compendium*, 537).

Those who shepherded the people of Israel helped them see that God dwelled in their midst. Foremost among these leaders is David, the shepherd and king "after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22). Sacred tradition holds that David's faith was the inspiration for the Psalms, the greatest prayers in the Old Testament. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Psalms are the Word of God given to us as our own prayer. They sing of God's goodness in creating the world and his promise of redemption. They were prayed by Jesus and are at the heart of the Church's prayer (*Compendium*, 540).

The Old Testament also shows us how the prophets prayed. Like Moses, they entered deeply into prayer before the living God. Overshadowed by the spirit of the Lord, they received the Word of the Lord so that they could speak to the people on God's behalf.

It was in Jesus Christ most of all that God our Father taught us what prayer is and how to pray. Both Son of God and Son of Mary, Jesus lived in obedience with Mary

and Joseph in their home in Nazareth. There, in his human nature, he learned from his mother how to pray. But as the eternal Son of God, his prayer had an even deeper source (*Compendium*, 541; Jn 1:14).

In the New Testament, we frequently find Jesus absorbed in prayer. He fasted and prayed for 40 days and nights before he began his public ministry (Mt 4:2) and prayed before choosing his Apostles (Lk 6:12). He often withdrew from the crowds to pray and taught his disciples the importance of doing so (Mk 6:31). Jesus, who taught us to pray constantly, made his whole life a prayer to his Father in heaven (1 Thes 5:17; *Compendium*, 542).

"Lord, Teach Us to Pray"

Jesus' prayer reached its pinnacle in his passion and death. During the agony in the garden, Jesus suffered intensely as he took upon himself the sins of the world and the anguish of a suffering humanity. In obedience to the Father's will, he laid down his life to save us. There[on the cross], he experienced for us the full weight of our sinful alienation from his Father and from one another. In this moment of supreme suffering on the Cross, Jesus interceded for us, and the Father heard his prayer and answered it beyond all hope by raising his Son from the dead (*Compendium*, 543).

Jesus gave us the "Our Father" as the perfect pattern of prayer. At the same time, he showed us the interior attitudes we should have when we pray, most especially purity of heart, openness to God's will, love even for one's enemies, and an intrepid faith and vigilance against temptation (*Compendium*, 544). The interior dispositions needed for prayer are beautifully summarized in the Beatitudes.

This leads us back to the truth that prayer is God's gift to us. Our prayer is pleasing to the Father when, in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is united to the prayer of Jesus. In this way, prayer deepens our communion with the Holy Trinity.

Finally, just as Mary taught Jesus to pray, so also she helps us pray. Before she conceived the Son of God in her womb, she prayed in complete openness to the living Word of God. Thus, she was prepared to share fully in the mission of Christ. Each day, the Church repeats Mary's beautiful prayer of thanksgiving, the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). Mary prayed with the Apostles at Pentecost and was present at the first eucharistic celebrations (Acts 2:42). Her prayers for us and for all our needs are loving and powerful (*Compendium*, 546-547). She always leads us to Jesus.[91]